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Is that all  
there is?

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

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## Inquiring Words A Samhain story

When death came to her house those months ago, her heart was a heavy stone in her breast and the tears welled and flowed. There was no comfort in talking, in those days on end of deep sadness. The empty space of a lost life followed her 'round from place to place, filled her thoughts and it felt like a darkness.

Now when Samhain came, October 31st, the mid-point between the autumn equinox and Yule, she had become calm and accepting. On this evening she would follow the ritual for her dead. Supper was prepared and the family and close friends gathered round the table. There was a chair and empty place laid for the one who had died. Candles were lit and while they passed the food around they talked about the life of that person in the empty chair. Some had brought pictures to show, one brought a scarf that had been worn. Another brought a gift that was treasured. They shared memories. They spoke of how their lives had been changed or enriched by that life. They spoke to the chair as if that person was really there, laughing, teasing, praising, remembering, toasting.

They felt the bond of love and were happy. No more mourning but celebrating the times and the years that had been. They cemented the memories into their hearts.

She believed the spirit of a dead person moved on to be one with nature. She said to the empty chair, 'Your spirit is always around me, in the scent of the flowers I pick for the table. Under the touch of my fingers that caress the trees I remember your strength. Your voice sings at dawn with the birdsong and hums in the sounds of the stream. My senses are alive to you in the seasons and you are in the stars and in the wandering clouds. Though I can never see you, your presence brings me peace. The love I have for you will never die'.

And some sitting at that table in the candlelight look uneasily at the shadows and wonder if the flickering shape outside in the darkness is just the waving branch of the autumn tree or maybe that spirit has come close to listen and yearns to be with them. They shudder and start telling stories about Samhain.

— Tony McNeile

# What if we *do* get more than one life?

What awaits us after death is the most exciting question of all says **Sheena Gabriel**.

I invite you to ponder a question also – something which Unitarians don't give so much attention to: the question of what may happen after death. Not what it's like for those left behind, but whether the consciousness that animates our bodies continues to exist in some form beyond the grave?

Some Unitarians protest such speculation is a waste of time, since none of us can know for sure. By and large Unitarians prefer to focus on living well this one life we *do* know about. Perhaps it's true that such a view can focus the mind, keeping before us the words of Unitarian poet Mary Oliver, 'What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' But I'd ask you to at least keep the door open to another possibility. What if we *do* get more than one life? What if this is the dress rehearsal for another life, or many lives? How would that change things? Would we consider our living and our dying differently, against that backdrop?

I hesitated when writing this. But I kept coming back to the feeling this question is too important to ignore as a faith community. So today I lay my cards on the table and say: I believe deep in my bones that the soul, the self – call it what you will – *does* survive death, though I hesitate to pin things down further. I've come to this conclusion through my own experiences, through speaking to others, through deep reflection, and through reading dozens of books on the subject.

## Every faith grapples with death's aftermath

Of course I can't prove it. My purpose isn't to try and convince anyone I'm right. (I don't know if I'm right!) But rather to start a conversation, because I've sensed, amongst Unitarians today, a certain taboo about expressing too much interest in an afterlife. Every faith tradition worth its salt grapples seriously with the question of what happens after death, and people I meet in my wider ministry are asking these questions. If our church communities don't provide a space to seriously explore such questions – be assured, people will go elsewhere.

It's worth recalling that most Unitarians of the past believed in life after death in some shape or form. One hundred years ago in his book *The Beliefs of a Unitarian* the Rev Alfred Hall wrote: 'Unitarians believe in the immortality of the soul and seek to base their beliefs on rational grounds... We shall start the next life just where we leave off in this. This is the general belief of Unitarians and they consider it their duty to prepare for the higher life of service, which will open out before them...'

Two World Wars changed things; the Unitarian belief in 'human progress onward and upward forever' took a battering, as perhaps did belief in divine providence. But even so, 'A Free Religious Faith', a 1945 report on Unitarian theology edited by Raymond V

Holt concluded that longing for survival was legitimate and surmised that as humans 'develop higher powers and become more sensitive, this evidence will be provided'.

Well perhaps that time has come? Not 'evidence' in the sense of irrefutable proof, but strong intimations: the testimonies of countless people and reputable scholars who put their necks on the line to explore such phenomena as Near Death Experiences (NDE's). As inheritors of open-minded scientific inquiry, should we not also engage with such findings? In doing so, we continue the legacy of that great Unitarian biologist and researcher into religious experience, Alister Hardy, who voiced puzzlement that we moderns should be so indifferent to the issue of human survival, claiming we are more interested in conditions on the moon than in the possibility of survival in another world.

## Eternal damnation is not for us

Of course we're right to dismiss the 'playing of harps on a white cloud sort of heaven' – though that set-up provides some great jokes! Like this one:

*A cab driver reaches the pearly gates. St Peter looks him up in his Big Book and gives him a gold staff, a silk robe and welcomes him in. Next in line is a preacher. St Peter looks him up in his Big Book, furrows his brow and says, 'OK, we'll let you in, but take that cloth robe and wooden staff.' The preacher is shocked and replies, "But I'm a man of the cloth. You gave that cab driver a gold staff and fancy robe. Surely I rate higher than him!" St Peter replies: 'Up here, we're interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cabbie drove his taxi, people prayed!'*

And, of course we're right to dismiss the 'hell fire and pitchfork' set-up that held countless people in thrall for centuries. I grew up with the prospect of eternal damnation hanging over me – and it took a lot of therapy to get over. But I wonder if in standing against sometimes ludicrous portrayals of a life beyond – as a faith group that favours reason – we're in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

Intimations of immortality have moved on from pearly gates and pitch forks. The idea that consciousness exists beyond the physical body is now a legitimate object of scientific research.

And there are hundreds of accounts, not just by religious folk, but agnostics, atheists, doctors, healthcare workers, and scientists. As medicine and end-of-life interventions have advanced, so the numbers of those who've 'clinically died' and come back to share their experiences – have increased.

Hallucinations caused by medication, or endorphin effects triggered by the body in extremis, don't come close to adequately explaining the experience of NDEs – reports of those who when clinically dead, hover over their bodies, see medics frantically work to save them, overhear snippets of conversation and describe details about the operating room they could not possibly have known from their supine position. The



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# EC wraps up TED, seeks more input

Executive Committee Key Messages,  
23-25 September 2018

## 1. Nightingale Centre

The Executive Committee made its annual visit to the Nightingale Centre as the venue for the September meeting and met with members of the Management Committee and the Centre Manager, Stella Burney. A report was received on the outbreak of Norovirus during Summer School and the measures taken to manage it which ensured the event could take place. All Centre staff were thanked for their positive and compassionate response in difficult circumstances. The Centre has been commended by the local GP and Public Health England for the actions taken.

An update was given on developments relating to the Centre and plans for the future, including additional en-suite accommodation. Financially it had been another positive year with Unitarian and other groups who use the Centre expressing great satisfaction with the quality of the service received. The Management Committee and the Centre Manager were thanked for their contribution.

## 2. Training and Education Development (TED) Project

The TED Project Governance Group reported on their final meeting held on 15 September 2018 at Essex Hall as the project came to an end. The pilot ministry training programme run by the new Unitarian College had held its first residential with five students involved. Student feedback had been very positive. The Rev Ant Howe had been appointed as Ministry Training Tutor and would take up post on 1 January 2019. The application for Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) status for the Unitarian College had been submitted to the Charity Commission, whose response was awaited. The substantial commitment of financial resources by the Executive Committee (£140,000 over three years) was welcomed as a clear statement of commitment to growing the number of ministry students in training in order to better meet the needs of local congregations.

## 3. Resignation of Executive Committee member

The resignation of Sheena McKinnon as a result of health issues was received with regret and formal thanks to Sheena were noted for her contribution to the work of the Executive Committee since her co-option.

## 4. Next Steps – From Vision to Action

The Executive Committee was able to spend some time reviewing the strategic issues facing the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and the particular role of the General Assembly within the movement. The “Next Steps” priorities were examined in detail to ascertain the current position and identify where energy should be directed. It was recognised that lessons could be learnt even where it had proved difficult to take forward a priority as originally planned.

## 5. Congregational Support

Simon Bland, Ministry and Congregational Support Officer, presented his observations arising from his visits and contacts with congregations and district

associations. Congregations tended to be reactive to issues of a ministerial vacancy, finances and buildings. In his work he had focused on how to support congregations to build their capacity, competency and confidence for the future. He felt that only with these resources available would they be prepared to invest in growth, which even then was likely to be slow but hopefully sustained. He thought that small innovations and changes were the most realistic and that sharing good practice, either across a District or on a national basis, on a particular theme would be useful. Simon was thanked for his work, which is shaped by the “Next Step” priority of building sustainable congregations.

## 6. Budget 2018-19 and Three-Year Plan

The Budget for the new financial year commencing on 1 October 2018 was approved. It was noted that significant expenditure would arise as a result of the appointment process for a new Chief Officer, which would be funded from reserves. The congregational quota would remain for a further year at £35 per member. A three-year plan was also presented to enable the implications of the considerable investment in ministerial education and training (see above item 2.) to be tracked along with other initiatives.

## 7. Risk Register

The General Assembly’s risk register was reviewed and updated in line with good governance requirements. Two new risks were added - the impact of the departure of the Chief Officer in April 2019, and the demands arising from the delivery of the new vision for education and training for all.

## 8. Consultation

The Executive Committee agreed to consider at its next meeting in November how it might better consult and engage individual Unitarians, congregations and district associations as it develops its work priorities and programme.

## 9. Nuclear Weapons

At the Annual Meetings it was agreed to send a message of goodwill and solidarity to the Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of people who were killed as a result of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs. A reply has been received from the latter:

“Last year’s adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and ICAN being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize proves that the majority of people on this earth, including the *hibakusha*, atomic bomb survivors, continue to seek the realization of a world free of nuclear weapons.

In order to bring this treaty early entry into force and to establish it as an international norm, civil society must continue to raise their voices. As such we are encouraged to learn that your organization will take such action.

I hope I can ask for your continued cooperation in our peace initiatives. In closing, I extend my best wishes for your continued good health and prosperity.”

# Minister attacked by internet trolls

By Ant Howe

Facebook seems to be a favourite online hangout for many Unitarians. There are a few specifically Unitarian Facebook groups, but you will also find Unitarians and Free Christians offering a liberal religious viewpoint on other Facebook pages.

For instance, a number of Unitarians have regularly commented on the pages of The Christian Institute ([www.facebook.com/christianinstitute/](http://www.facebook.com/christianinstitute/)) and Christian Concern ([www.facebook.com/CCFON/](http://www.facebook.com/CCFON/)), whose favourite topics seems to be LGBT issues, wanting to reverse equal marriage, and trying to counter what they see as the LGBT 'agenda'.

Unitarians have challenged some of the opinions expressed there, tried to expose some of the cruel attitudes which seems to be behind some of the postings, and attempted to show that there are different ways of being religious.

Those Unitarians who comment do it in the hope of providing an alternative viewpoint and some balance in the discussion. Unfortunately, a number of Unitarians have had their posts deleted without warning and been banned from posting.

Recently, Christian Concern began a discussion about the decision of some evangelicals in Wales to affirm a 'biblical view of marriage'. A number of Unitarian ministers and laypeople, as well as some members of other churches challenged the comments that followed.

The debate quickly turned nasty, with Unitarian ministers being accused of leading people into 'the lake of fire' in hell!

One of our Welsh Ministers – the Rev Wyn Thomas – gently expressed the loving acceptance of Unitarianism: that all of the 6 chapels he serves offer same-sex marriage services, and that he and his husband are loved and affirmed in our faith.

The replies were, to say the least, extreme!

One reply stated: 'I am appalled at your defiant attitude to God and can well believe that it is opinions like yours which will lead Jesus to say to those like you: "Depart from Me I never knew you!"'.

Another stated 'I am amazed, you are a "minister of God"... As you do not obey His word and encourage and conduct "same sex marriages" you are putting your future eternity and many others in a terrible place – the Lake of Fire – which is reserved for you and those like you who ignore His teaching.'

The debate went on, with many Unitarians offering their thoughts and venturing that the Bible is not quite as clear cut on some matters as was being suggested.

But the next day things took a rather sinister turn.

Wyn's personal Facebook page was flooded with postings from a Christian Concern member, calling his chapels a "sodomites church" and posting homophobic material. Wyn was then personally messaged 14 times by different people who encouraged him to kill himself and saying that there was 'a special firepit in hell' for him.

Wyn's public and private responses were gracious and, later that day, Wyn



Wyn Thomas, right, with his husband Matthew Walters

publicly posted a picture of himself and his husband Matthew, with the comment:

'While any haters and bigots are perfectly entitled to hold your personal opinions, know two things:

1. You do not have monopoly over the all-loving, all-benevolent God who called me into service.
2. I will never be ashamed of love and will never, ever, hide."

This message of Wyn's was shared many times by Unitarians and others. Hundreds of messages of support came in for Wyn. Many were impressed by Wyn's gentle but firm response.

The BBC picked up the story and Wyn was invited with others, to go on BBC Cymru Radio to talk about the events. The story also got its own page on the BBC news site under the headline "Internet trolls urged gay Llandysul minister to kill himself". The story subsequently made it onto PinkNews, and a Twitter campaign #StandWithWyn began.

Countless Unitarians have been commenting how proud they are of Wyn – and the response from Wyn's congregations has been typically loving. They obviously cherish their Minister!

It was a horrible experience, but the inclusive message of Unitarianism has been widely shared because of it. Wyn has already been contacted by a same-sex couple enquiring about a wedding.

It is sad to think that someone's faith in God would lead them to encourage another to kill himself, and it underlines how important the Unitarian view is. Our message is needed more than ever! Unitarians do have much to offer to the contemporary religious debate and we stand in contrast to those who believe that God is just waiting to send people to hell. The Unitarian view of life and faith, as well as our engagement with texts such as the Bible, leads us to believe that love is far more powerful than hate.

We are thankful for those Unitarians who take the time to challenge cruel and extreme religious views, and we are especially thankful for our own Rev Wyn Thomas!

*The Rev Ant Howe is minister at Kingswood.*



BBC Wales covered Wyn's story.

# Dying: Intimations of immortality

(Continued from page 3)

Rev Forrest Church, the late Unitarian Universalist minister who wrote extensively on mortality, suggests in his book, *Love and Death* that the trauma of death may, in certain instances, release latent powers in us. Most of the time trapped in our bodies, we exercise a tiny percentage of our potential. But in times of extremis other states of consciousness break through.

## Perhaps, a guidebook

If this is true, is it so unthinkable there may be other planes of existence – what the ancients called heaven? I know some Unitarians will find this controversial, but I hope we can start a conversation, because to my mind what might await us after death is the most exciting question of all. When you go on holiday, take a trip abroad, don't you try to find out what the destination is like? Look through a few guide books? Preparing for a life beyond isn't the same as booking on RyanAir, and packing a suitcase. But aren't you a teeny bit curious as to where the onward journey might take us?

I agree that living this one life as though it's the only one, guards against the panacea of 'it will be alright, pie in the sky when we die' excuse – which stops us rolling up our sleeves and doing what we can to make this world a better place. Even Rabbi Jesus, who in the Gospels spoke plainly about the reality of a life to come, insisted that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us and amongst us – here and now. But I don't think it's an either/or argument. Can we not do our work in this world, and at the same time hold open the possibility of another world to come?

Because a counter argument could be made: that a rigidly held belief in 'this life is all you get' can lead some people (of course, not all) into a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, where life is cheap, devoid of meaning. You've heard of bucket lists: 100 places you must see before you die, 100 things you must do... fair enough! But on coming across one book '100 beers to drink before you die' I had to ask *really?* Is that as far as a secular approach to making the most of 'this one precious life' goes for some folk?

Every time I hear in the news of another teenager stabbed to death in a gang fight, or another school shooting in the US, or a jealous husband who kills his estranged wife and children, then takes his own life, I can't help wonder if they had any concept of a life to come? Would a belief in reincarnation and the law of karma, act as a tempering agent? Did the thought that there may be consequences in a life beyond, stay the hand of would-be murderers in past generations? Though I'm aware of the counter argument: that terrorists and suicide bombers believe a fast track to paradise is the reward for atrocities committed in the name of their interpretation of Islam.

The arguments are multi-faceted and complex, but *sometimes* a belief in a life beyond, can enhance people's capacity to live well in *this* world. In his book *Lessons from the Light*, Kenneth Ring, one of the foremost researchers in the field, explores the impact of NDEs, not just on those who experience them, but also those who read about them. He cites the work of one psychologist who used NDE bibliotherapy with his depressed patients. After reading near-death accounts, they found their own suicidal thoughts reduced. Pondering the fact that death may not bring sweet oblivion, and considering the wider perspective of their souls' purpose, enabled them to

work more effectively with their problems in *this* life.

Ring also explores the phenomena of the life review, which opens up intriguing questions. Again and again people who've undergone NDEs mention their lives flashing before them, including incidents long forgotten. In a heightened state of consciousness, they fully understand and deeply feel the impact of their actions and words, however insignificant, on others, for good or ill. What if we lived as if we might one day undergo such a review ourselves? Would it change what we do and say? In these life reviews it's significant that there's no judgement from a higher power. Even though most people report being conscious of another presence during the review, the person sees for *themselves* the impact of their actions; any judgement is of their *own* making.

## 'Trailing clouds of glory'

Some would say we're random creatures of chance: any meaning is what we ourselves create. But even if I'm wrong, I *choose* to live my life as if, in the words of William Wordsworth, we come 'trailing clouds of glory from God who is our home.' This framework enables me to live this life more joyfully and fully than I otherwise could. Each of us has our own framework of meaning. It may be different to mine, but whether we believe in an after-life or not, perhaps we'd agree that we can't go far wrong in shaping our lives around the wisdom of John Astin's song 'Love, Serve and Remember':

*Why have you come to earth? Do you remember?*

*Why were you given birth?*

*To love, to serve, and remember.*

The American author and spiritual teacher, Ram Das tells this story. A young man asked his Guru Neem Karoli Baba on his death-bed for advice on how to live well. Baba went into deep meditation, opened his eyes and said simply, 'Love everyone, serve everyone, and remember God.' Ram Dass distilled this down to 3 spiritual principles: 'Love. Serve. Remember.'

What's interesting is that these 3 themes come up again and again in NDEs. People are shown that all that matters ultimately is how they *loved* – not how successful they were, not what they believed – but how they loved. And they come back to this life transformed, with a passion to *serve*: not sitting around waiting to die and be reunited with the light, but with a mission to serve and help others here on earth. And NDErs talk of accessing knowledge greater than the human mind can encompass – a process of *re-membering*: recognising the source from which they come, and realising the divinity within them and all beings. Those who come back from NDEs seem to embody these three principles for the rest of their earthly lives: they Love, Serve and Remember. Perhaps we can do likewise.

Whatever your beliefs, consider these words in *Love and Death* by Forrest Church: 'All we can say with any confidence about the afterlife is that it cannot be any stranger, more unexpected than life before death. The least prepared pilgrim could not be more startled by heaven the moment following death than a preternaturally prescient embryo would be astounded by life on earth the moment following birth.' Forrest Church invites us to ponder the cosmic odds that we're here at all. If I'm wrong and this one life is all we get, it's still astounding!

And beyond the question of other lives, what I feel with a

(Continued on next page)

# 'Forever letter' creates a legacy

By Kate Dean

Whatever our beliefs about what happens after death, many people wonder what their legacy might be and how they will be remembered. If we believe that our loved ones live on through our memories of them, knowledge of their values can enrich our understanding of them and their lives. This is why I believe that the practice of writing an 'ethical will' can help us learn from each other, understand our own values and pass them on to our loved ones.

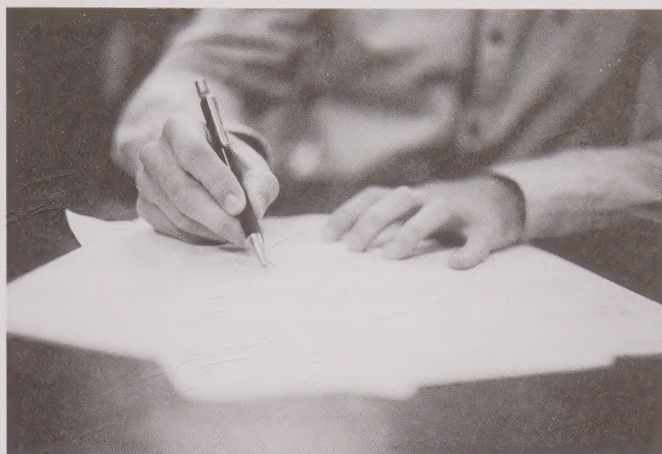
The Hebrew word for an 'ethical will' is *zava'ah* and it is a tradition with Jewish roots. The first ethical wills can be found in the Hebrew Bible, where Jacob gathers his children around his bedside to tell them how they should live after his death. Other examples appear in the Apocrypha and Talmud, as well as medieval and modern Jewish literature.

Although you may begin writing as a way to pass on your values, beliefs and wishes, an ethical will can help you learn more about yourself too. If you take the time to articulate what you value most in life, to ponder your personal experiences and the decisions you've made, you'll find that writing an ethical will can help you reflect on your life and even serve as a tool for self-improvement.

The concept of the ethical will can go beyond the traditional letter written by a parent to give to their child. In *The Forever Letter: Writing What We Believe for Those We Love*, Rabbi Elana Zaiman uses this spiritual practice to show readers of all ages how to write meaningful letters to the loved ones in their lives. You could write a letter to your child or grandchild, your parent or grandparent or even your teacher, student, brother, sister, spouse, partner, or friend. 'A Forever Letter is for anyone in your life that matters to you,' Zaiman writes, 'When we write letters to the people we love, we give them a tangible gift that they can embrace for life, a gift they can touch and hold, a gift that reminds them of our love for them and our appreciation of them, a gift that becomes a permanent brick in the structure of our relationship and strengthens our bond.'

## How to write a Forever Letter

Zaiman suggests that you begin by setting aside dedicated time to write the letter and start it by writing or typing the word 'Dear...' Then continue to 'freewrite' a stream of conscious, whatever flows out of you. You can always edit it later, so this 'zero draft' should contain whatever comes to mind in that moment. 'Write to share your values, wisdom, appreciation, and love, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive, to disclose the struggle in your soul or to reach out to someone whose soul is



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in pain,' she says.

The sorts of areas you might like to cover in your letter include lessons learned and personal stories from the past; values, beliefs, and expressions of gratitude from the present; and advice, hopes, and requests for the future. Zaiman also cautions us on what should be left out of a Forever Letter: 'Favouritism, commanding with the pen, telling family secrets, encouraging others to live values we never lived, lying to others or lying to ourselves' have no place in a good letter!

We can use the act of writing the letter as an opportunity to reflect on the highs and lows, achievements and mistakes in our lives, but we must do this with a good dose of self-compassion. If we're honest, we may find that certain values we once held dear are now less important to us and also rediscover values which we wish to hold on to. In writing the letter, we can recommit to living these rediscovered values more consciously.

And you don't have to wait for death before your letter is passed on. Zaiman describes significant stages in a person's life when they might appreciate a Forever Letter, for example, a letter given to a young person about to start university.

In this season, when we might think of loved ones who we have lost, it seems like a good time to consider how we can pass on our values to those we may eventually leave behind.

*The Rev Kate Dean is minister at Rosslyn Hill, Hampstead.*



## Dying: It's astounding that we are here at all

*(Continued from previous page)*

deep knowing in my bones is that we are all held by a greater Love than we can ever fathom. I end with words by Unitarian minister, Peter Roberts, words copied from an *Inquirer* article some years ago, which speak to this sense of knowing:

*For myself, I do believe that, though we are always 'looking through a glass darkly' in this life, we, and our lives, are known and understood with transparent clarity by that Divine Consciousness which has given us a life to live as part of an eternal evolution of the spirit. I believe that we are kept in that*

*Spirit throughout all the joys and excitements – all the sadness and the dullness of routines – all the phases of our living and of our dying.*

*The Rev Sheena Gabriel is minister at Godalming.*



# Friendships form a web of love, support

I recently spent some time with old friends at an old friend's wedding. It was great to spend time celebrating with them; it was also wonderful to be with mutual friends, some of whom I have shared so many experiences with in the past. Some wonderful, some deeply painful. It was lovely to sit and talk and share with them as I re-felt and remembered.

We also remembered old friends no longer with us. A few days later I met up with some old recovery friends as we celebrated one of our number's 16th 'sobriety birthday'. Again it was deeply moving to remember old times and friends and re-feel these experiences.

A few days later I saw one of my oldest friends, someone I have known since I was a teenager. We were even in a band together. It was wonderful to talk about old days, to reconnect, to remember, to re-feel all kinds of emotions. Some were happy and joyous and others much sadder – especially as we remembered old friends no longer with us, or current friends who are struggling with life.

The wonderful thing about being with old friends, people you have been through so much with, is that as soon as you come together it's as if you had never been apart. We are bound together by threads, so strong and, in some strange way, so deep.

I think the greatest blessing of my life has been my friends. I have many friends, loyal friends and loving friends. Friends who have stood up for me and loved me at some pretty dark times in the past.

## Where did the connection come from?

As I look back at my friends and friendships I wonder what allowed the connection, that made the connection – or do I mean connections – a web of connections of mutual love. Some people became my friend quickly, while others took longer. I have weaved what Emerson has described as social threads of my own, a new web of creation. I wonder how many threads will be weaved, what new web of creation will I become a part of. I love the way that these threads intertwine with the threads of others as new webs are weaved.

The great 19th-century Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson recognised the true value of friendship, and the many webs of relationship that make up our lives. He believed 'a friend is a sane man who exercises not my ingenuity, but me. My friend gives me entertainment without requiring any stipulation on my part ... so that a friend may well be recognised the masterpiece of nature.'

## Emerson spoke of webs of relationships

For Emerson it mattered enormously that we matter to others, that we are not isolated beings drifting through life. Gosh how true is this? Doesn't it matter enormously that we matter to others, and that we are not alone; that our lives are made up of webs of relationships; that our lives thread through many others and that this really matters? We are not isolated beings floating through life, only concerned for ourselves. To me this seems to strike right at the heart of what friendship is all about.

Emerson said, 'Who hears me, who understands me, becomes mine, – a possession for all time. Nor is nature so poor but she gives me this joy several times, and thus we weave social threads of our own, a new web of relations; and,

From nothing  
to everything  
by  
Danny Crosby



as many thoughts in succession substantiate themselves, we shall by and by stand in a new world of our own creation, and no longer strangers and pilgrims in a traditionary globe.'

All life is connected, everything is connected, all of life is relational.

## Wilbur loses a true friend

This brings to mind a rather lovely children's story that illustrates both friendship and unconditional love. The story is *Charlotte's Web*.

Near the end of the story Wilbur the pig is confronted with the awful news that his 'true friend' Charlotte is going to die and will not return to their shared barn with her babies. Charlotte had saved Wilbur from the smokehouse and the Christmas dinner plate. He asks Charlotte 'Why did you do all this for me? ... I've never done anything for you.'

To which she replied 'You have been my friend, that in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I like you. ... By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that.'

Wilbur replies, 'I would gladly give my life for you – I really would.'

Wilbur lives on and as he does he carries Charlotte's love with him. He takes charge of her egg sac. He returns it to the safety of the barn and protects it until the spiders hatch, most fly off on the sticky webs, but three remain with Wilbur to continue Charlotte's lineage in the barn doorway. As Wilbur lived on he had many friends, but none of them took Charlotte's place in his heart.

Charlotte's Web is a beautiful illustration of the power of love and friendship, of these threads that weave these mutual webs of friendship that make up our lives. It is a story of unconditional love, of friendship grounded in giving to one another. It's about relationships rooted in humility, love and giving of ourselves to one another. It's not about selfishness and self-centredness, but mutual webs of interconnection. Isn't this the nature of life?

A friend in need truly is a friend indeed. We all need good friends. We all need – and we all need to be – friends at times. As I look back at the web I am a part of, I see many threads that make it up and I see there are threads that will continue on when I am no longer weaving my own. We are all a part of the web of creation; we are all weavers of the social threads of life. So let's keep on weaving those threads of mutual love and intertwining our threads with others. For a friend in need truly is a friend indeed.

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.*

# It's time for Pride-style drugs marches

Yes, well, I have been thinking. (Obligatory pause for the usual childish remarks.) There are more and more Pride Marches, which everyone really enjoys – both participants and spectators – because they are joyous, colourful and celebratory.

I was just wondering if we could use the format to raise awareness about certain social issues. Let's take drugs.

There is increasing discussion on whether or not legalising certain drugs can lead to a decrease in drug-related deaths and crimes:

*New York Times*

'Decades ago, the United States and Portugal both struggled with illicit drugs and took decisive action – in diametrically opposite directions. The US cracked down vigorously, spending billions of dollars incarcerating drug users. In contrast, Portugal undertook a monumental experiment: It decriminalised the use of all drugs in 2001, even heroin and cocaine, and unleashed a major public health campaign to tackle addiction. Ever since, in Portugal, drug addiction has been treated more as a medical challenge than as a criminal justice issue.

'After more than 15 years, it's clear which approach worked better. The United States drug policy failed spectacularly, with about as many *Americans dying last year of overdoses* – around 64,000 – as were killed in the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq Wars combined.

'In contrast, Portugal may be winning the war on drugs – by ending it. Today, the Health Ministry estimates that only about 25,000 Portuguese use heroin, down from 100,000 when the policy began.'

So, it's simple, isn't it? No, apparently not. When the Foy Society presented its motion to the Unitarian General Assembly (GA), it got nowhere:

'This General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches asks the UK Government to establish without delay a Royal Commission or interdepartmental public inquiry to –

1. Examine the present UK drug-related health and crime situations and compare those in other countries.
2. Examine and review the efficacy of current UK legislation in relation to drugs both those which are illegal and those which are legal.
3. Review options for alternatives to the current criminal justice-based approach, drawing on the experience of other countries, including the appropriateness of the medicalisation and decriminalisation of drug substances and the treatment of addictions.'

So is it that, even to friendly, caring, reasonable Unitarians, drug users are seen as 'beyond the pale' because, presumably like fat people and smokers – they brought this on themselves. And, of course, unlike fat people and smokers, druggies live and die on the streets?

What we need is not an attack on Parliament – writing to our MPs, etc. – which is what we usually do when we want a change in legislation. What we need is a change in attitude.

So I am suggesting Pride-style Marches with upbeat messages on colourful banners – 'Set them free' or 'Darkness into Light', Lower Pocklington Unitarians say: 'Let them live'.

Now, with Pride marches everyone knows what they are for. So on my Druggies marches we should need to give out leaflets. Probably Transform could help. (<https://www.tdpf.org.uk> – they have sent a speaker to the GA meetings)



And think on this.

'The prestige of the government (of the USA) has been lowered considerably by the prohibition (of alcohol) law. For nothing is more destructive of respect for the government and the law of the land than passing laws which cannot be enforced. It is an open secret that the dangerous increase in crime in this country is closely connected with this.' – Nobel Laureate Professor Albert Einstein, in 1921.

'Annual drug deaths: tobacco: 395,000, alcohol: 125,000, 'legal' drugs: 38,000, illegal drug overdoses: 5,200, marijuana: 0. Considering government subsidies of tobacco, just what is our government protecting us from in the drug war?' – William A Turnbow.

I've got pages and pages more of this sort of stuff if you want it.

We criminalise drugs and thus allow wicked people to make lots of money and we turn people, who often have a medical or social problem, into pariahs who will die in agony on the streets.

OK, this is my last one. We decriminalise drugs, *we save money*.

Legalising drugs in the US could save the federal government \$88 billion, according to Harvard economics lecturer Jeffrey A Miron.

The findings, published by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, show that 'legalising drugs would save the federal government an estimated \$41.3 billion in drug prohibition enforcement expenses.

Legalising drugs – including marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and synthetic drugs – would also generate tax revenues of about \$46.7 billion', Miron argued in the paper, which he co-wrote with Katherine Waldock, a doctoral candidate at the NYU Stern School of Business.

Do you think that if we had the same number of Drug Marches as Pride Marches we could change the public perception of drug users and thus encourage a change in legislation?

What do you think? Twice the number of glorious marches. Should I go out now and buy the net for my tutu?

*Dorothy Haughton is a Unitarian service leader.*

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# Letters to the Editor

## Address change for 'Education' book orders

To the Editor:

Unfortunately it has come to light that letters (including book orders) sent to the PO Box address that appeared on the advertisement for *Education for Humanity* (*Inquirer*, 22 September) have been going astray.

It looks like it's fixed now, but if it has affected any *Inquirer* readers, I can only apologise and if we can identify them, we will of course compensate them fully.

The postal address we are now using is:  
Spirit of the Rainbow  
Suite 70

2 Mount Sion

Tunbridge Wells TN1 1UE

I am so very sorry about this.

**Simenon Honoré**

Tunbridge Wells

## 'God' article offered much to ponder

To the Editor:

I was most interested in Stephen Lingwood's article (*Inquirer*, 22 Sept), 'God, Boopsie – what's the difference?' which brought up a number of points I have never really considered before but has really got me thinking.

One result of his article is that I am inspired to tell you of a recent experience of mine. I had gone to bed one night and could hear an animal scuffling in the loft and chewing somewhere above my bed. The crunching sound was quite loud and was keeping me awake, and I was not helped by my vision of roof joists, etc. being steadily destroyed as I listened. After a while I shouted, 'Shut up!' I tried this several times but it had no effect at all. Next, I found a blunt instrument, stood on the bed and banged the ceiling with it. This silenced the creature, but only for a few seconds after which it continued crunching as before. I had several attempts at this, but to no avail – each time the animal seemed shocked into only a short silence.

I got back into bed and considered my strategy. I thought of a new approach. Again I stood on the bed immediately below where I thought the animal was. I looked at the ceiling and said, very gently and kindly, 'I don't mind at all

sharing my house with you, and you are most welcome to be in my loft, but please could you stop making a noise because I do need to get to sleep and I just can't sleep while you're doing all this chewing. Thank you.' My creature went silent as I started to speak, and this time it remained silent, silent and still silent ... I got back into bed and went to sleep. Not only was I able to sleep but, instead of regarding this animal as a pest, I now considered it a friend.

We were both at peace!

**Jo Rogers**

Kendal Chapel

## Nothing personal to me in the multiverse

To the Editor:

Re 'God, our imaginary friend?' (*Inquirer*, 22 September) by Stephen Lingwood.

I, too, talk to animals, trees and other things, including myself, but I do not choose to interpret the universe as personal, except in a poetic sense. Nor do I expect these talks to be replied to, except by me. Respect and reverence, yes, of course. Mystery, too. Indeed, as I understand it, the human brain has to interpret all impressions it receives and we are not conscious of most of this information, just the results, so that we can respond quickly and usefully to our environment, external and internal.

I wish I did find the universe loving and supportive, but instead I find – not choose – directly and indirectly that reality creates, preserves and destroys impersonally. Nature is the supreme recycler. The universe seems to consist of a multitude of interconnected parts which do communicate with each other but mostly without consciousness; seemingly systematic, yet full of randomness. We have to find meaningful lives in this setting. Humans experience the universe as individuals and have to make sense of it well enough to survive, at least. Better still, to develop rich and rewarding lives for themselves and each other, as we are social creatures. How can we relate to the universe (or multiverse)? Imagination is a powerful ability available to us. But reason and emotion also play their part.

One key question for me is how much

power individuals, and therefore the groups we belong to, actually have. We learn more and more about the powerful influences on our behaviour – genetic, biochemical, historical, environmental, cultural, etc. But I believe that we are not completely determined – even though there are those who are trying to hack our brains. I remain convinced by experience and reason that every one of us has *some* freedom to choose how we live. And the more we believe it, the more likely we will behave with responsible freedom.

I am pleased that Stephen has found joy. Long may it continue. Perhaps he, too, follows the way of Bonaro Overstreet, whose response to the awareness of the many limits on our freedom replied, 'but I am determined to use my stubborn ounces for good.'

**Phil Silk**

Retired minister, member of Newcastle Unitarians

## Trinity does get a mention in the Bible

To the Editor:

Frank Walker (*Inquirer*, 6 October) writes that there is no mention of the Trinity in the New Testament.

What about Matthew 28:19:

*Go then to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

**John Watson**

Sunderland

## Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com). Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only.

# Opinion: Congregations need help to grow

By Rosemary Ruston

I noted, with sadness, the item in *The Inquirer* (8 September), that the congregation at Trowbridge has sold its building and will be meeting in members' homes or other venues. I also see, from the General Assembly Directory, that it has only been meeting occasionally, every one or two months. It's a small congregation, basically hanging on with its fingernails, relieved of its building.

It's not the only one. I found 45 congregations in the Unitarian General Assembly Directory which meet only once or twice a month; some of these have buildings, others had buildings, some never had one – the old Fellowships. That's 45 out of 170.

Fellowships were encouraged at the beginning of the 1960s when the Unitarian Universalist Association in the US thought they might become centres of growth. I understand some did; no doubt some did not. None of ours have grown. They have come and gone as enthusiasm rose and waned. Now 45 congregations have become Fellowships in all but name – usually meeting just once or twice a month, not knowing how to grow.

No thought has ever been given by either the Districts or Headquarters to this situation – I certainly didn't notice anything when my parents became part of an original Fellowship in Bedford and haven't noticed anything since.

Former GA General Secretary Jeff Teagle, in his study of congregations in late 1990, forecast that there would be quite a number of congregations going the same way as Trowbridge. If we want that forecast not to come true, then I think it's time for some hard work to be done on how small congregations can be helped to help themselves. Money is unlikely to be a problem – I'm sure it can be found if necessary.

Something should be done now. Reminder – they all pay a Quota!

I know congregations are independent, but a little pro-activity might not go amiss.

Ideas? Here are two. Groups grow because members talk to friends and neighbours. Help every member to reply 'I'm a Unitarian or Free Christian because...' if asked the question 'Unitarian/Free Christian – What's that?', (and maybe include someone else's reply, to show our diversity).

Help every congregation to produce their own leaflet, pamphlet or similar, containing at least two short answers (see above), plus inspiring words, thoughts, etc. which *reflect you as a group*, to give to any new attenders or inquirers. Your next meeting could be up to three weeks ahead; give them something to think about.

Other ideas welcome.

*Rosemary Ruston is a member of the Watford Fellowship.*

## FUSE offers varied programme by the seaside

FUSE, the Festival of Unitarians in the South East, returns to Worthing in February. The theme of FUSE is 'Sustaining the Beloved Community', building on last year's theme of 'Fostering a Beloved Community'. The guest speaker is Jennifer Kavanagh, who will speak on 'Our Inner and Outer Belonging: Where is our sense of belonging? How do we feel included? Excluded? And how do we include or exclude others?' Jennifer is a Quaker, and a speaker and writer on the Spirit-led life and an Associate Tutor at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre.

She is also a microcredit practitioner and facilitates conflict resolution workshops. Jennifer has published nine books, including: *Heart of Oneness*, *Little Book of Unknowing*, and her first novel, *The Emancipation of B*. Balancing an active life with a pull towards contemplation is a continuing and fruitful challenge. As she writes, 'Life in the world is about a series of balances: of the life within and the outside world; inner experience and outward witness, plenitude and the void'.

Jennifer's seminar will give attenders an opportunity to explore what belonging means to us, and how it may enable us to express our fullness in the world. We will also consider how in our spiritual lives we balance between belonging and longing.

FUSE runs 15-17 February, beginning with Jennifer's pre-conference and ending at lunchtime on Sunday. There are 16 optional workshops throughout the weekend, extending the arc of 'Sustaining Beloved Community' and organised around the themes of: Spirituality; Our Community; Social Action; and Creativity and Music including a short workshop by Jennifer. In addition, there is a choice of attending morning devotions, meditation and yoga. On the Saturday evening participants can attend a showing of a film by John O'Donohue and, later into



*Small groups gathered to discuss fostering community at FUSE 2017. Photo by John Hewerdine*

the evening, can dance and sing along to Stephen Crowther's FUSE Karaoke Special. Quieter space, for conversation and reflection, is also available.

Anyone who attended FUSE in Worthing before will remember the Chatsworth Hotel, situated close to the seafront, within a five-minute walk from the pier, the town and the swimming baths/Leisure Centre.

The Chatsworth has undergone decorative improvements, and has ample accommodation for FUSE.

More information about the programme can be found on the FUSE website: [www.fusefest.org.uk](http://www.fusefest.org.uk). As in previous years, participants can choose to come as day delegates. There's also a children's programme and a creche for under-fives. Young people between the ages of 12 and 17 can bring a friend free of charge.

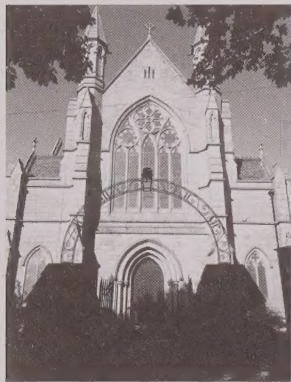
All are welcome. Register via the website [www.fusefest.org.uk](http://www.fusefest.org.uk) or contact Janet Costley on 01732 464211.

# News in brief

## Dukinfield shortlisted for national award

Dukinfield Old Chapel's restoration work to the roof and ceiling of the chapel has been shortlisted for the King of Prussia Gold Medal award through the National Churches Trust in association with the Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association.

The congregation will be represented at the 1 November awards ceremony in London. The nomination was made possible by the work of the chapel's architect Mark Pierce of Lloyd Evans Pritchard, and contractors Heritage Conservation Restoration of Mossley. The award website says, 'This project included careful structural timber and plaster repairs



in tandem with re-roofing works and renewal of rainwater goods that were specifically designed to enable them to be more easily inspected and maintained in the future.

'The conservation work has allowed the chapel to reopen. The works are aimed at growing the church and the use of the chapel building by the local community.'

Photo by Mark Pearce of Lloyd Evans Pritchard.

## Jesus in words

Son of God? Son of man? Miracle worker? Prophetic teacher? So much is believed about Jesus, yet still so much is unknown.

As Frank Walker wrote in the 6 October *Inquirer*, Thomas Sheehan is among scholars who are considering the evolving legacy of Jesus. What is your view of Jesus? How does that relate to the Unitarian faith? Has your view changed through the years?

Share your ideas with readers of *The Inquirer* in December's 'Faith in Words' issue. It can be just a few sentences, or up to 400 words. Please send typed contributions via post (editor's address on page 2) or email: [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com)

### Faith in Words

Contributions for the annual 'Faith in Words' Christmas issue are also welcome. Please send prayers, addresses, meditations, art work, photographs – anything that relates to the birth of Jesus, Solstice, Hanukkah, Winter or the other ways we mark the season.

New contributors are most welcome. For more information or to submit material, email: [Inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:Inquirer@btinternet.com) Or, send typed contributions to the editor's postal address on page 2.

**Contributions due  
2 November**



A Red Cross doctor examines an Indonesian earthquake victim. Photo and one below by Hariandi Hafid/British Red Cross

## Indonesia Earthquake appeal continues

The deadly earthquake and tsunami that struck Indonesia on 28 September left nearly 2000 people confirmed dead and 5000 more missing. Survivors are in desperate need of food, water, shelter and medical treatment.

With a major power cut and damage to communication lines we don't yet know the full extent of the devastation or loss but we do know that families are in desperate need of immediate help.

Devastatingly, this need will only grow in the coming days. This terrifying disaster is yet another blow to the people of Indonesia, who are still recovering from another large earthquake which shook the country in August. Indonesian Red Cross volunteers and staff are on the ground, supporting search and rescue efforts and distributing vital aid.

Please act now to save lives.

'The survivors of this disaster have lost loved ones, homes and livelihoods. We cannot let them lose hope as well', says Iris van Deinse, a Red Cross delegate.

If you wish to send a donation please donate online at <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/Team/UnitarianChurches> or <https://bit.ly/200UG3R>

Cheques payable to the British Red Cross may be sent to:  
British Red Cross

FAO Louisa McLellan, Clara Barton  
Indonesia Emergency Appeal  
44 Moorfields  
London EC2Y 9AL

The Clara Barton Unitarian fund has raised more than £100,000 for relief work by the British Red Cross.

— Feargus O'Connor

